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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the immediate and long-range advantages of parent involvement, the definitions and implications of varying levels of parent involvement in child care center operations, and the general means by which a chosen level of involvement might be achieved. The advantages of parent involvement are discussed briefly in terms of the child, parents, and staff and center, and several factors affecting the level of involvement are outlined. Four general categories of parent participation are defined (non-involvement or little involvement, non-decision-making, decision making, and parent control) and their implications enumerated. A few suggestions for involving parents at each desired involvement level are given. (ED)

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PARENT INVOLVEMENT: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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The Why, What and Hows of Parent Involvement

Introduction

The purpose of the following discussion is not to provide a barrage of specific ways to involve parents in the processes of day care; rather, our focus is on the immediate and long-range advantages of parent involvement, the definitions and implications of varying levels of parent involvement, and the general means by which a chosen level of involvement might be achieved. It is our belief that parent involvement will not be successful unless persons involved with a center make a conscious decision about what type of involvement is best for them, and then work hard to make it happen.

I. GENERAL PHILOSOPHY BEHIND PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Initially, the movement toward parent involvement in day care grew out of two general concerns. One concern centered around the importance of the role of the family in early learning and social development; and the other, around the benefits of community control over educational policy and decision-making. In recent years, the scope of concerns which have formed the basis for the movement toward parent involvement has broadened; in addition to the reasons just mentioned, centers which we have visited express a great variety of reasons for parent involvement, from the perspectives of the child, the parent, and the day care center itself. We believe that the first step in developing parent involvement in your center is a clear consideration of the reasons why you want parents involved. Knowing exactly in what ways you believe parent involvement is important will help you to work more directly and constructively toward your goals.

The centers which we visited saw many advantages to parent involvement, both in immediate and long range terms. From the child's perspective, parent involvement gives a sense of greater continuity between family life and the day care center. Also, it may give him a sense of added security and satisfaction that a parent is interested and involved in what may take up a large part of his day. Parent involvement at a center may indirectly help the child by enabling a teacher or director to have a greater understanding of the individual child's situation, needs and problems. This will help to increase staff effectiveness. Also, parent involvement may broaden the scope of the child's learning experience through the contributions of individual parents.

From the parent's point of view, parent involvement at a center allows the parent to learn about what happens to his or her child, what he is taught, what he eats, etc. Parent involvement may both allow the parent to protect the child against any possible neglect or in some instances abuse, and, in addition, reduce a parent's anxiety or guilt over leaving a child in a day care center. And, parent involvement may provide parents with an opportunity to learn new organizational skills which they can apply to other groups and areas of interest. Further, personal satisfaction and self-esteem will grow as parents gain authority and responsibility within the center. Getting involved may provide a means for parents with personal problems to work them out, either on an individual or group basis, and with either day care staff members or with other parents who share similar problems or concerns. Lastly, parent involvement may help parents better understand their child and better care for him.

From the staff's perspective, parent involvement can increase the continuity between home and school, which will increase the staff's effectiveness in working with children. Furthermore, a center can't run by itself; parent involvement can provide needed services: maintenance, fund-raising, etc.

These are many advantages to parent involvement; and you, no doubt have experienced or will experience other advantages yourself. Your first step in involving parents, then, is to decide how much and what kinds of parent involvement you want to try to get, to meet what kinds of goals.

Several other factors however, will affect the level of parent involvement which you decide to work towards. One factor is the make-up of the parent group. What is the percentage of working mothers? How many parents are raising children alone? What are the cultural and ethnic values of the group, and how might they affect the nature of parent involvement? Similarly what are the family patterns? (A group in which fathers strongly influence or totally control decisions affecting child-rearing practices will call for a different approach than that used with a group in which mothers have total responsibility in the decision-making area concerning child-rearing.)

Another important factor which will influence your decision is the existing structure of the day care center. Who organized the center? Who makes the policy decisions? What is the source of funds? What resources are available to meet the needs of your parent group? In some cases, an already existing structure may limit you in reaching your goals. In other cases, you will be able to structure or restructure the center in a way which will enable you to pursue your goals.

A third factor which you must consider is the scope of the clientele as you perceive it. Do you see the individual child as the client of your day care center, or the entire family? If you see the child as the client, you will be more concerned with involving the parents for the benefit of the child, whereas if you view the entire family as the client, you will most likely attempt to assess the needs of the parents and other children as well as the individual child.

So many factors are important to consider in planning and implementing parent involvement at your day care center. Most importantly, do you want parent involvement? Why and how much? What existing structures might limit reaching your goals and how might you overcome those limitations? And, who is your clientele and what are its needs and abilities?

DEFINITIONS AND LEVELS OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parent involvement or parent participation means all things to all people. It can be represented by a parent buying a ticket to a fund-raising event or to parents making all policy decisions at a center. What we would like to do in this part of our discussion is to sort out these meanings--to help you better think through what level of involvement you would like to see in your center or better understand what type of parent involvement you have now. Please keep in mind that the distinctions we draw are arbitrary to some extent. Rather than representing every type of center, they are general categories that reflect the level of parent involvement in many centers. The discussion will also focus on implications of choosing a particular level of involvement.

1) Non-involvement or little involvement:

While parent involvement has been praised by government agencies providing day care funding and child development experts alike, it is important to remember that not all centers include parents in their programs. A parent may bring his child to school, pick him up at the end of the day, and perhaps have one conference a year with the teacher or director. This pattern may be particularly true for proprietary centers. In this case the center is run by the owner or his director to provide a needed service but also to make money. A premium may therefore be placed on efficiency, control, etc. At the same time, incentives for parent involvement--such as fund-raising activities in a center dependent on public and private contributions--do not exist. This is not to say that some for-profit centers do not involve parents--or would not if asked. And remember too, that the parent in a sense has the ultimate say because it is he who buys what the center has to offer. If he is not satisfied, he can take his business elsewhere, that is, if there is another center in his area! It is this type of economic control that might encourage a center to have more parent participation if that is what the parents want.

Some centers--proprietary and non-profit--try to bring parents into the center in a limited way, by having a number of parent conferences and parent education programs during the year. The focus of participation is the child; benefits resulting to the parents themselves are incidental and not the reason for trying to involve parents. The main goal of these activities is to provide parents with information to improve their understanding of the center's classroom experience and their own children--and can be promoted as such. Parents may be able to give some feed-back, but there is no institutionalized guarantee of effect.

2) Parent involvement--non-decision-making:

At this level staff play an even more active role in bringing parents into the center. In many cases the center may require greater involvement due to limited funding and the need for fund-raising activities. Teachers may ask that parents become more involved in the classroom by volunteering time or going on field trips. General support activities for the center are also involved here. Fund-raising has been mentioned.

Other centers might have work days to repair equipment or to paint. Parents may provide specific services (e.g. a doctor giving free physicals, an artist giving special art classes, parents providing car pools. An effort may also be made to organize activities that address the needs of parents, or that simply are social occasions which help parents get to know each other.

In general, this level of involvement is initiated by the staff, is mostly beneficial to the center's program and is directed at (and sometimes for) parents. Parents may have some input in deciding what types of activities should be undertaken. The burden of involvement, however, rests on the shoulders of the staff. They must appeal either to parents' altruism (when something like fund-raising is the question) or to their personal needs and desires. This is the most common type of parent involvement and one that frequently raises the question of how one can go about getting parents more involved in the center.

3) Parent involvement--decision-making:

It is this level of involvement that has been encouraged in particular by programs like Head Start. Here parents have a formalized role in making particular decisions within the center. They do not, however, make all decisions, nor in general do they make the most critical ones (e.g. hiring the director, budget decisions). The most common vehicle for this type of participation is a committee structure--or perhaps parents make up a part of the center's governing board. Parent initiated activities might include decisions on curriculum, discipline, fund-raising, public relations, etc.

Parent participation at this level cannot occur without the parents themselves taking a considerable amount of initiative and accepting certain responsibilities. It is much more difficult to attain this level of involvement, but it is also clear that parents can gain a variety of personal benefits from participating.

4) Parent control:

In a center that is controlled by parents either all decisions are made by a parent board, with certain decisions deferred to the full parent body, or the board decides which decision-making responsibilities will be designated to the director and/or staff. The parent board is concerned with all aspects of the center's operations, from finances of the center to hiring and firing of the directors and possibly staff.

Parent controlled centers are not common. They are undoubtedly the most difficult to establish and require a great amount of effort on the part of parents and staff once they get going. A critical factor in the establishment of a parent controlled center is financial support.

In this case there is probably not a private agency or church group sponsoring the center -- and a government agency may be more careful in committing funds to a center that will rest solely on the resources of a parent group. The Child Care Task Force in part grew out of the setting up of the Sojourner Truth Day Care Center in Hyde Park which began and continues to operate as a parent run center. In the discussion that follows we will be glad to speak of our knowledge of the experiences of this center. It is particularly important to point out that we do not think that parent control can be forced on a community or on parents. It must to a large extent be a grass roots initiative that will depend heavily on particularly strong parent leaders. It is also important to say that this kind of center can be very rewarding for all involved.

III. TECHNIQUES FOR INVOLVING PARENTS

Techniques for getting more--or even some--parent participation will differ depending on the level of parent involvement desired. However, a few principles are true no matter what small amount of parent in-put you want at your center.

One of those principles is that getting parents to be active at all takes work. Whether you are the director of a center or a parent trying to involve other parents, you will need to put together structures and create activities which will capture the imagination and energy of your center's parents. When some ideas don't work, you will have to try others, and you won't be successful if you get discouraged easily! When all your efforts begin to pay off, you will know that your energies have been very well spent.

Another general principle to remember is that teachers are key to the parent participation process. In most centers they are the main link with parents: if they are open, supportive and positive in their interactions, they can be one of your parent program's primary assets. You should work to see that teachers present an image of openness to parents.

A third principle to remember is that parents must know that their participation makes a difference. Whether their involvement is limited to two conferences a year or they are working in the center every day, parents--as all volunteers--need to know that their contribution is a valuable one and that it is appreciated. Even more, it is VERY important in centers trying to involve parents in decision-making, that parents be able to see that their decisions do affect what happens. Parent involvement can die very quickly if parents think that they are some kind of a "show piece" decision-making group for a director or another body that is really making all the center's decisions. So, if your center decides to encourage parents participation in decision-making, it must be sure that it is really willing to deal seriously with the recommendations and decisions that the parents make.

Lastly, whatever levels of participation you want at your center, you will be much more successful if you can make the activities fun.

1) Non-involvement or little involvement

Clearly, you will approach efforts to get parent participation differently depending on how much and what kind of involvement you or your center has decided it wants. At the least, even at centers with almost no participation, parent conferences should be scheduled several times a year between either the director and the parent or the teacher and the parent. Teachers and director need to conduct such conferences so that they are positive about the child and non-threatening to the parent, but at the same time deal with problems which need to be dealt with. Parents should learn from conferences that they are involved in their child's growth whether they want to be or not, and that they and the center can work together for the best interests of the child. Parent participation at this level should not be seen as optional--it is an important element of any child care program, whether other forms of participation are encouraged or not.

2) Parent involvement--non-decision-making

For centers interested in increasing parent participation on a non-decision-making level, there are many possibilities. Projects and activities which both appeal to parents' interests and also meet some of their own needs will increase their chances for success. For example, many centers have set up adult education classes for parents at the center, such as sewing, basic accounting and the like. Classes provide an opportunity for parents to get something for themselves at the center; they also have the advantage of bringing more parents to the center more often.

Classes and discussion groups might also be set up which directly relate to parent concerns as parents. For example, you might organize a group of single parent families to meet together on a regular basis to talk over problems they face as single parents raising children.

Parent education is an important part of any parent participation program. Parents may not be anxious to come to school in the evening for meetings, especially if they work all day. However, if the center sets up a series of programs which deal with specific areas of child development, early childhood education, and child behavior--programs which will help parents relate better to their children--they are likely to become interested.

Concentrate on finding ways to build a sense of community around your center. The more parents feel as though they belong at the center and are confortable there, the more often they will come, and the more participation and help you will be able to get. Social events on holidays and important dates for the center are not only fun but often provide a much needed community social gathering place where people can get to know new people with whom they already have something in common. A parents' lounge also provides a legitimate social gathering place where parents begin to feel comfortable. A regular newsletter put out once a month or so by parents and staff also helps build a sense of community. And, of course, as mentioned earlier, parents will only start to feel comfortable about "hanging out" at the center and getting involved in what is happening there if the staff is atuned to parents' needs and goes out of its way to be warm and open in any contacts with parents. (Sometimes a home visit from a staff member can help build rapport--as well as provide staff with useful information about a child's family situation.)

Once you have started getting parents into the habit of coming to the center for activities that meet their needs, you can begin to ask them to help the center with some of its needs. For example, if parents are taking a particular course, they might be asked to do something with the children related to their course of study. Many parents have hidden talents and hobbies which they would love to bring to a class; a questionnaire asking parents what they might have to teach young children (as well as other ways they might like to help out the center) can help identify what some of those talents are.

Parents who come to the center and who seem to relate well to children can be asked to volunteer occasionally at the center--if they don't work. Parents who have special skills useful at the center--anything from carpentry to fundraising--can be recruited to help.

In other words, provide activities for your parents which they will enjoy and which will give them something, and which will make them feel good about the center. Then they will be open to helping with some of the needs of the center.

3) Parent involvement--decision-making

A center which is hoping to get parent involvement in some levels of decision-making can and probably should use many of the ideas listed above for developing parent participation. In addition, these centers will want to begin to set up some decision-making structures. If the center is organized into room groupings, a room chairman can be picked to work with the director to set up regular meetings of room parents. Room meetings can be used for a variety of purposes; they can provide an opportunity to discuss what happens in particular rooms during the day with the children, what ideas and thoughts parents have on what happens in the room, and what plans, ideas and opinions parents may have for the center as a whole. A system should be set up so that these ideas get passed on to the director as well as to whatever body makes policy decisions at the center, and responses to parents' ideas should be communicated back to room meetings.

Special committees within the center can also be set up to deal with specific concerns. Committees which deal with maintaining the center, setting up regular parent orientation sessions for new parents, and working on fund-raising projects can be invaluable to the center's healthy functioning. To be successful, they will need some parent or staff member to work with them and move them along, they will need to have some recognition and power to make some decisions in their areas of concern, and they will need to be fun--or at least to have some interesting and fun aspects to them. (For example, a fundraising which involves selling pop corn at a community art fair turns out to be great fun--as well as work. Having a work day which is combined with a beer party can be successful socially as well as bring about some improvements in the physical appearance of the center.)

A particularly important committee, and one which often draws a lot of interest among parents, helps develop and evaluate the kind of program parents want to see at the center. A program committee provides a concrete way for parents to participate as partners in their child's development. It can also help communicate that parents have a responsibility to think about and help form the program they want for their child. Such a program can also put strains on the staff and director. Difficult distinctions have to be made between the extent to which the director and his/her staff are in charge of program and the degree to which parents have important rights to express what they want in a program. Staff will, at the same time, need to be supportive of parent efforts in the area of program and not intimidate parents with their own "expertise" as child care workers. In the end, such a program can have very positive effects on the strength of the center as a whole and particularly on parents' involvement with their children's development.

At the top of the room and committee structure, you may want to have an advisory board--or a clear decision-making board if your center is parent controlled. If the final decisions are made by a higher body, it will again be important that you have an advisory board that has the power to make real

decisions in some significant areas of center operations. If the real decision-making body ignores all of the ideas and recommendations of the advisory board, you will be better off not to have one at all!

4) Parent control

A parent controlled center can and must make use of all the methods of building participation listed above. In addition, such a center will have to be particularly sensitive to certain procedures and attitudes which will help insure the success of the center.

As director, paid parent coordinator, or super involved parent in the center, it is VERY important that you deal with any fears that you may have about really letting parents run the center. It is natural, particularly for directors, to have mixed feelings about being totally accountable to a parent board. But if you want parent control, you will have to be willing to let it happen--or it won't happen! And there is really no reason not to let parents take on as much responsibility as they will--as long as they are learning to do it well. The more parents learn how to deal with policy and planning for the center, the more help they will be to you in freeing you to do your job of running the center on a day-to-day basis. In addition, the more people who are actively concerned with and responsible for the center, the stronger it will be.

Any parent controlled center will want to have some defined structures and role relationships--for everyone's benefit. This means that you will want to have by-laws which outline what the board is responsible for, what the director is responsible for, what the parent body as a whole is responsible for, and generally what all the relationships should be between parents, board, and staff. Of course, by-laws speak in general terms, and it will take a while in a new center, or in a center with a new director and new board members, for all the specifics to be worked out to everyone's comfort. The overall guideline is that the board of an organization makes policy and the staff carries out that policy. This is often easier said than done, but part of building a strong parent run institution is working out how everyone can work together to get things done the way people agree they want them done.

New parent orientation is critical for any level of parent involvement, and is particularly important in a parent controlled center. Make the center's expectations clear from the very beginning. At interviews, parents should be told that the center can only exist if they are involved with it. As soon as children are enrolled at the center, parents should be contacted about what parent responsibilities are at the center, and they should be involved in an activity immediately. Some centers even have official contracts which parents must sign indicating that they will participate in various ways to support the center. Whether it is done with an official written document or oral discussions, the seriousness of the commitment must be made clear from the beginning.

Activities, programs and committees described in earlier sections of this discussion will have to be given some order and structure. The center should be organized in such a way that parents can begin by doing easy, small and fun tasks, and will somewhat naturally be moved along to more responsible tasks which involve increased ability and responsibility. Part of the trick is to make each activity for parents at the center a learning activity which will make them better

prepared to work at more responsible tasks that need to be done. Another part of the trick is to be aware of different people's pace; some people get involved in projects a lot, soon while others make very small commitments, one at a time. Someone at the center will have to take responsibility--formally or informally--to see that this process of "moving along" takes place, and to use the maximum people capabilities available without burning people out or scaring them away.

Another very important formal or informal job, especially at a parent controlled center, is "people identification". There will have to be active people at the center--the director and board chairman among them--who never stop identifying good people with ability or potential ability. When such people are found, they then must be given jobs to do, and moved up the ladders of responsibility as fast as they can and/or will go!

What all of the above amounts to in the end--most importantly for a parent controlled center, but almost as importantly for any center trying to build parent participation--is that parent involvement takes ORGANIZING. Parents will not magically decide to participate and take responsibility. Someone, and most likely it will be the director at the beginning, will need to be thinking all the time of new ways to bring parents into the center, new ways of capturing their interest, new ways of building participation into the center's structures, and new people to recruit and give jobs. It will never happen without a lot of thought, a lot of behind the scenes leadership, and a lot of evergy and hard work.

SOME SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES AND HINTS

Room Meetings
Some centers have found that 5:00 or 5:30 is a good time for room meetings; parents can meet while there is still child care available, and these meetings need not last more than 45 minutes to an hour.

Parent Education
Some good topics for parent meetings are: separation, aggression, stages of development, children's rights, parent organized field trips. You may want to seek the help of an outside resource person to lead the discussion. Often a film can zero in on a particular topic and a discussion can follow.

Parent-Staff Workshops
Workshops might focus on anything from how to lead group games to teaching new songs to making cognitive games and toys. The Teachers Center, located at 1400 East 53rd Street, offers a helping hand in planning such sessions and has a variety of materials available for centers to use.

All Center Maintenance Workdays
About three times a year your center could use a face-lift which might include repairing, painting, cleaning, waxing floors, sewing new sheets and blankets, and building cubbies and shelves. A little repairing and painting can help keep replacement costs at a minimum. It is also good for the children to see their parents involved with their center. March is a particularly good time for a workday, as the city begins relicensing centers in the spring.

Good Publicity is an essential key for success.
When advertising for an event, day off or program change, two or three notes should be sent home. It is important that the notes be pinned to the children. Posters and group phone calls are also helpful. Each group can have a leader in charge of calling their group. The center should have at least one person and possibly two in charge of publicity.

New Parent Orientation
Tell parents exactly what they are expected to do and give them a choice of committees that they might like to serve on. There are certain times of the year when many new families enter the center (September is usually one such time); a center might want to plan a group meeting for new parents at such times. Having a parent talk individually with a new parent in his/her child's room can underline the importance of parent involvement (this is in addition to what the director says in the entrance interview).

Newsletter
Good newsletter articles might include: what field trips are planned; a thank you to all of those who have helped with special projects; program changes; announcements of new staff; a column written by staff. There could be room for each committee to report, as well as favorite statements overheard from the children. Two or three people can be responsible for the news gathering, printing, and distributing. Each room group might have one person responsible for the news in that room. A deadline should be set in advance for collecting the news for that particular issue. Printers and businesses can sometimes be pursuaded to donate paper to use for your newsletter.

Social Activities
Having pot-luck dinners are fun. These can be planned around a theme such as ethnic foods or just be pot luck. Picnics on Saturday or Sunday afternoons provide a

relaxed way of coming together. Give rides to those who need transportation. Some centers plan movie or theatre events for their parents. Weekend camping trips for the whole family can be planned.

Fundraising

Many centers find they need outside funds not only for equipment and supplies but to help supplement their budget. It takes a lot of planning to carry out any fundraising event smoothly, often as much as several months. A chairperson in charge of fundraising is important as is a working committee of parents. New parents should be given a choice of the event they want to participate in and this might even be done at orientation. A few ideas are:

1. Yearly benefit - Popular entertainer
   - Theater or movies
   - Concerts
   - Dinner-dance
   - Guest Speaker
2. Rummage - Bake Sales
3. Plant Sales - Get large plants donated from wholesale buyers to sell at your center.
4. Craft Sales - Parents make Christmas ornaments, etc.
5. Pop Corn Machine - Used at community events such as art fairs, carnivals, parades and sporting events.
6. Candy Sales
7. Raffles - Get merchandise donated from your local businesses and sell raffle tickets for a drawing. This might be combined with another event such as a pot luck dinner.
8. Bingo - A special permit must be purchased through the city of Chicago. Permits can be for a one night party or for once a week parties.
9. Film Series - You could plan movies for children on Saturday mornings or an adult film series--or both.
10. Auction - Local merchants could be asked to donate items to be auctioned off.
11. A Business - A group of not-for-profit agencies could go together to buy a business to be operated by parent volunteers or by a paid manager. Some suggestions: resale shop, restaurant, bakery, specialty shop, book store. This is obviously a major undertaking but one that makes sound financial sense in some cases.
12. Car Wash - Might be combined with a Saturday or Sunday morning brunch.

Some suggested places to obtain films for Parent and Staff Education:

Modern Picture Service (they will send you a list of films)
16787 Elmhurst (good Headstart list)
Elkgrove Village, IL 60007
593-3250

Chicago Public Library (they will send you a list of films)
Education Extension
North Michigan and East Washington
Chicago, IL
CE 6-8922

Illinois Department of Public Health (they have a list of films)
Bureau of Health Education
505 State Office Building
401 S. Springfield
Springfield, IL 62706

Presbytery of Chicago (they have a list of films)
800 W. Belden
Chicago, IL
(A good film to see "What Children Got Out of What Adults Say", also
Families in Learning (Everyone's a Teacher)
929-8665

Division of University Extensions(they have a list of films)
Visual Aid Services
704 South 6th
Champaign, IL